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east timor news agency
agência de notícias de timor leste
ETNA

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AUSTRALIA'S IMAGE IRREPARABLY TARNISHED?

Geneva, 5 March (ETNA) - After seven years of silence in the UN, last night's "Consensus Declaration on the Human Rights situation in East Timor" puts the East Timorese people back on the UN agenda after four weeks in which East Timor was one of the most visible and highly discussed issues at this 48th session of the Commission on Human Rights. This Consensus Declaration is much weaker in form and wording than the proposed resolution on East Timor which clearly had the support of a majority of member states. Why and how this resolution was undermined and ultimately pushed aside are questions concerning many at the Commission.

ETNA interviewed Russell Anderson, an Australian citizen and eyewitness to the massacre in Dili, who has been present and giving testimony at the Commission and who said: "The stand of the Australian delegation is no different to that of the Australian government in its recognition of Indonesia's annexation of East Timor and its complacency towards alieviating the human rights situation in that country. Mr Bill Barker of the delegation told me "Australia sticks up for human rights". Not when it comes to East Timor. During the time I have been at this Commission, the Australian delegation has not only lobbied actively against a resolution on East Timor, but at a crucial moment, Mr Bill Barker deliberately spread disinformation to mislead the negotiation process and effectively weaken the chances for a resolution. One thing is very clear to me. Neither the Australian government nor its delegation at the Commission can be relied upon to act in a true spirit of reconciliation and justice for the East Timorese people. I call upon the people of Australia to continue to pressure our government. Unless this happens, the Australian government will continue to support the genocidal process in East Timor."

Another Australian present during the Commission, Judy Gunson, told ETNA that "from my conversations with delegates, NGO's and prominent observers it is clear that Australia's blatant actions in sabotaging the resolution on East Timor are widely viewed with concern and often, with disgust. It is well known within the Commission that because of its economic ties with Indonesia, Australia cannot act impartially on human rights issues in East Timor. After its behaviour at this session, I believe that there are many delegations here who no longer find Australia credible on human rights issues. Australia's image among human rights workers is seriously tarnished."

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05-03-1992 11:44 DE 41 22 7330826 P/ C.I.D.B.C. PAG.01